

Collaboration

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Nishta - Margaret Woodrow Wilson
Photo Courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives

Staying on for an evening meditation with Mother

One of the Yoga's first American disciples was Margaret Woodrow Wilson, the daughter of a U.S. president whose commitment to world unity led to the League of Nations. Through Seyril Schochen's play *Nishta: The Strange Disappearance of Margaret Woodrow Wilson*, American disciples can read about this remarkable beginning of the Yoga's influence in their country.

Sri Aurobindo took note of Woodrow Wilson's proposal for a League of Nations in *The Ideal of Human Unity*. He commented that Wilson spoke for The League with; "...a magnificent nebulous idealism full of inspiring ideas and phrases, but not attended by a clear and specific application. American idealism was always governed by a shrewd sense of American interests, and highest among these interests is reckoned the preservation of the American political idea... as a result the opportunist element became the legislation of the map and political reformation of the post war world. Its idealistic side favored the increasing application of the democratic principle with a representative body of nations."

Personally, I think that what is significant about this American disciple is that she is a woman searching for an inner change; a woman with, as we're told in the play, the "ability to speak and write and organize and teach" about peace. The political experience and knowledge gained at her father's side could have been utilized for any social issue she desired to advocate. Ultimately she desired complete union with the Divine reality.

This drama set in the Pondicherry Ashram portrays the problems of such a person being assimilated into the Yoga. There's a striking image of Margaret, as a strong willed woman, crippled with arthritis, tapping her cane on the floor to call up her ashram attendant. We can easily imagine ashramites gathered around her to be attentive to her physical needs, and to teach such a woman of the world the necessary surrender and way of sadhana.

How much surrender had already been achieved by this American woman is evidenced in this extract from a letter to one of her friends.

"Personally when I look back on my own life I do not regret any experience that moved even a little the waters underneath the earth, the finer perceptions and feelings, the subtler elements in my nature. I regret only the superficial frittering away of time and energy, the skating on the surface of things."

What brought Margaret to the Yoga was, of course, the books. She read Sri Aurobindo in the New York City Public Library. She then corresponded with Sri Aurobindo and Mother. From the few remaining pieces of that correspondence, we find that Sri Aurobindo recognized Margaret's ability as a seeker. It seems that she had established the habit of inward concentration by the time she wrote to him. He counseled her to open herself to the Yoga by establishing an inner closeness with them and their spiritual practice. He asked that she remain in the U.S. to establish the contact there.

"We are doubtful about the advisability of your coming here the next winter. Your illness and the fact that you suffer from the heat stand in the way....Finally, you do not know perhaps that I am living at the present in an entire retirement, not seeing or speaking with anyone, even the disciples in the Ashram, only coming out to give a silent blessing three times in a year. The Mother also

has not time to give free or frequent access to those who are here. You would therefore probably be disappointed if you came here with the idea of a personal contact with us to help you in your spiritual endeavor. The personal touch is there, but it is more of an inward closeness with only a few points of physical contact to support it. But the inner contact, inner help can very well be received at a distance. We have not any disciples in America, though several Americans have recently come here and become interested in the yoga. But we have disciples in France and some of these have been able already to establish an inner closeness with us and to become aware of our nearness and help in their spiritual endeavor and experience.

You have asked what is the discipline to be followed in order to convert the mental seeking into a living spiritual experience. (Sri Aurobindo explains the quieting of the surface mind and concentration in the heart center) To concentrate in the heart center with the offering of oneself to the Divine, and the aspiration for this inward opening and for the Presence in the heart is the first way and, if it can be done, the natural beginning for its result once obtained makes the spiritual path far more easy and safe than if one begins the other way."

Why did Margaret then go to the ashram? The answer is found in a letter that Margaret wrote to Mother expressing her desire to realize the Divine.

"I am desperate about ever being able to make the real surrender, even the beginning one, without help from one who knows. I have not even a glimpse of the sea into which I must plunge, no slightest glimpse of the Divine reality, no psychic sense of the Presence of God. I have only the unshakable conviction that He is within and I in Him, and that others have realized Him in varying degrees, some to the point of complete union with Him, the Purushottama.

But, Mother while I find hope in the fact that Sri Aurobindo's books and a response in me that is too ardent to be called just intellectual, I am haunted with the fear that I am doomed in this life to remaining just a pseudo-mystic, never truly realizing the Truths that so appeal to me and that in their reality are all I want to live for."

Finally Margaret's correspondence reveals that when Sri Aurobindo gave her the name Nishta, it was for her a baptism. Nishta, a name meaning a one-pointed fixed and steady concentration, devotion and faith in the single aim; the Divine and the Divine realization. This play does not tell us whether or not Nishta succeeded in her goal. We know only that family, friends and the U.S. government couldn't take her away from it. In the final scene she stays on for an evening meditation with Mother.

We, the editors, of Collaboration publish this play in its entirety in this issue in order to share a little of the ashram history. We also thank Seyril and The Dramatist's Guild for giving us permission to publish this play. And through Seyril we celebrate in a creative way the beginning of our sadhana here in the U.S., that we may find a larger sense of ourselves as shadaks.

(Extracts from Margaret Woodrow Wilson's correspondence with Mother and Sri Aurobindo, 1936 and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Chapt. 29, pp. 507-9. SABCL.)

NISHTA

The Strange Disappearance of Margaret Woodrow Wilson

Cast (in order of appearance)

Nishta, Margaret Woodrow Wilson
Anil, a young Bengalese sadhak, age 16
Dhun, a Parsee ashramite, age 30
White House servant
Indian woman refugee
Ambu, Nishta's ashram attendant
Isaac, a White House servant
Pavitra, French ashramite, a Yogi
Jagannath, Anil's father, a Bengalese Brahmin patriot
Swami Nikhilananda
Tom Eliot, an English mystic
Madge, a Broadway actress, age 54
Eleanor Roosevelt
Nell Wilson McAdoo, Margaret's sister
Ship's Doctor, a U.S. Navy Officer, age 54
Mr. Compton, Margaret's suitor
Rev. George, a Presbyterian Missionary, age 70
President Woodrow Wilson
American Consulate Secretary
Mrs. Woodrow Wilson 2nd, Edith, Margaret's stepmother

Time: A summer day in 1940

Place: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, South India, French Territory during World War II

Action: of the play passes in the mind and heart and memories of an American woman, in the past Miss Margaret Woodrow Wilson, eldest daughter of President Wilson; in the present Nishta, her Sanskrit name, during a day in her Ashram life.

Setting: Nishta's quarters, an Ashram flat with wide verandah overlooking the sea and port of Pondicherry, a sleepy French provincial town on the Bay of Bengal. Below Nishta's flat: Ashram Meditation Hall on whose white-panelled walls are projected the magic lantern show of her memories as in a labyrinthine inner space.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: Nishta's ashram quarters early morning, 1940

At Rise: A small, thin woman in white dress, long and severely simple, bends over sheaf of galley proofs on her worktable facing the sea: the audience. With her faded blonde hair and erect, disciplined posture she appears much younger than her 54 years. Completing her editing work she makes a notation from a galley proof into a journal attached to box of lantern slides. Sound of South Indian flute and temple music drifts up from the street. She looks up; and we see the unmistakable face—in feminine diminutive—of her father Woodrow Wilson, complete with pince-nez and determined jaw. There is a sense of strength and deep concentration, of passion-

ate fire, power and pride about the woman in white, as of an American "Princess" accustomed to walking with kings. Her expression softens as she listens to the temple music and flute. Tying galleys and putting them to one side with an expression at once of reverence and strict orderliness, she takes a book from her table and goes to a standing blackboard on which she chalks in large bold caps:

Essays on the Gita Chap. "The Supreme Divine"

Woman in white (reading aloud from book as she writes on blackboard)

"The Dark Path of the Fathers"

"The Bright Path of the Gods"

(Boom of ship's horn—a deep, resonant OM—is heard from sea.) Startled, she walks to window with erect, even stiff bearing and a slight limp. Peering out over the sea searchingly, surprised by what she sees, she adjusts her pince-nez almost severely and in disbelief. Simultaneously she hears a light tap on front door, and a Small voice with Bengalese accent calling to her softly, timidly. Outside on her verandah a bright ray of the sunrise catches, like a lover's arm, the figure of a young Indian sadhak in white dhoti carrying a bouquet of wild flowers and white cotton ashram bag. Hugging the verandah wall cautiously as if fearing to be seen, he taps again timidly on door. Resembling a young dark golden-skinned Christ, his black hair and large dark eyes—everything about the 16 year old boy—glistens as with a blazing ardor made visible. Suddenly gathering courage he flings himself up to the doorway ... where he stands on the threshold trembling.

ANIL (urgently) Miss ... Veelson? This is Anil here; from Ashram Press.

(to himself, excoriatingly) Fool! You must not use her old world name, but our Master's name for her! Please? Miss ... Nishta? Miss Nishta?

(The woman in white—Nishta—opens door. He bows, palms folded; rapidly, awkwardly, but intensely) *Namaskar. Namaskar.* I greet God in you. May I come in?

NISHTA (warmly) Of course, Anil! But aren't you early? (Anil slides in, closing door apprehensively behind him. She regards him with puzzled amusement.) You've come for the galley proofs? (Going for the galleys, she places them securely in his hands which she notices are trembling as he offers her the field flowers he has hidden in his white ashram shirt.)

Why, thank you! (touched and concerned, presses his hands) You've been working since early dawn at the Ashram Press, haven't you? Is that why your hands are so cold, Anil? (He does not answer, as if afraid of the inner tension pressing.)

Please sit down. You don't have to take the proofs to Press until after our *Gita* class, do you? (He holds the proofs clutched tightly to his chest. She sits beside him. Softly.)

What's troubling you, Anil?...

ANIL (bursting out in despair) I cannot come anymore ... to our *Gita* class, Miss Nishta. I am forbidden. By my father. (leaps to his feet)

The French Arjuna in our class ... left today at the call of the Lord. To join the Free French. In our Mother's War. While a son of Indian ... obeys his human father. And not his Lord Krishna. (passionately) A coward. Unmanly. Is before you, Miss Nishta—daughter of the once Commander-in-Chief of the Western World. Champion of the New Freedom. *Your* father Voodrow Veelson President of America. (flourishing galleys he has memorized)

"League of Nations! Event of capital importance," our Master writes! "Initiation of a new era in world history!" Chief of the League of Nations' warriors, your father! Yes, Miss Veelson? Miss Nishta, I mean! ... Can you bear to look upon this coward skulking out of the sight of *his* human father ... for a word from you to free him?

NISHTA (gently, seeking his hand) What word from me do you need? You, a son of Mother India ... who know her *Song of God* better than I do?

ANIL (gripping her hand, sits beside her; blazing-eyed) Our own Mother in Ashram sits long with you, Miss Nishta; tell her my heart. That I would fly for her ... in whatever sky she sends me! A small little eagle, but one with fierce longing and wings to soar on her work and the Lord's for freedom! To smite down the cruel demon oppressor Hitler! Not in wrath or hatred, but ... remembering God. (leaps up, striding to blackboard)

And not on the Dark Path of the Fathers! But the Bright Path, as we read in the *Gita* "Remember Me and Fight!" God says to Arjuna. So I would fly in the Royal Air Force of our Master's England ... for love of Him, my Pilot, my Engine, my Wings, the Bird of my Soul!

NISHTA Surely He knows your heart!
And with His Wings ... how can you fear your human father? What is his name? Jagannath?

ANIL (sinking to a chair) It is. But you do not know him, Miss Veelson.

NISHTA (smiling) There's no longer a Miss Wilson here.

ANIL Miss Nishta! There is no longer a man Jagannath here but a superman of the Aryan Master Race! Who came to this Ashram because of Bengal's revolutionary Aurobindo, most dangerous foe of the hated British! And now ... now ... this same Jagannath, my father, decides to take me out of the Ashram because this morning he reads the message on Ashram Notice Board ... You have read it?

NISHTA Not yet ..

ANIL (whips copied notice out of his ashram bag; reading it ringingly) "All who by their thoughts and wishes" ... even *thoughts and wishes*, Miss Nishta! ... "support and call for victory of the Nazis, are by that very fact collaborating with the *Asura* against the Divine! And helping to bring about the victory of the *Asura* "

NISHTA *Asura*...?

ANIL

The anti-Divine. Demon. Hitler, in this war.

NISHTA (drily) And what does your father, the Aryan superman, say to that?

ANIL That our Indian Master has been ... mastered. By a woman ... French! (in tears) Our Mother is a perfumed Parisienne to him! He dances with joy when her city Paris fell to the Nazi Führer as a fellow Aryan ... of the Master Race! For my father was educated in Munich ... and is proud of it ... and ... and ... (he is about to rush out in despair)

NISHTA (detaining him; soberly) Hasn't he read what Sri Aurobindo wrote to all of the sadhaks here? That the victory of the Axis would drag humanity back, degrading it horribly ... and might even lead to our eventual failure as a race? And the people of colour, like your father, will be the first to be degraded. Even as the Jewish people ... (quietly seats him and goes to refrigerator)

Stay for our *Gita* class's Power Syrup at least, Anil. (pouring him a glass of rosy-coloured syrup) Not your last in my house, I hope. How could you possibly reach England to train for the RAF?

ANIL (looks about carefully; mastering his tears, lowers his voice; eagerly) An Englishman dressed as a *sannyasin* ... you know? An Indian monk who gives up the world for God ... ? I saw him this morning in the Ashram. They whisper that he is a spy. But others say he comes to ask our Mother for guidance. I will speak to him ... and Mother will guide us both! (lifting glass)

Her Power Syrup! For *Victory to the Divine*!

NISHTA (regarding him doubtfully and with love) You're too young to go, Anil.

ANIL (leans to her intensely) What did we read last week in our Master's *Essays on Gita*? When the Teacher opens Arjuna's mind to the sight of God, he acts by God's power in him. Then nothing can limit him ... not age or time or space ... he is free! By God's Power in him!

NISHTA (raises her glass; as fervently) May we all be opened to the sight of God! (They drink together as if taking communion. Anil returns emptied glass reverently, and rises resolutely.)

ANIL (with a new steadiness) Now I can take his *Ideal of Human Unity* proofs to Press for you, Miss Nishta.

(As Anil goes to door, Dhun [early 30s], a Parsee Indian woman in flowered white sari, graceful, a flower in her long black braided hair, carrying a small harmonium, has mounted outside staircase in haste. Tapping at door and entering without waiting for an answer, she stands with her back to the door.)

DHUN (softly, anxiously) Your father is hunting you, Anil. Perhaps you should slip out the back way. You can leave through my room. (offering him key)

It's behind Nishta's back staircase. Downstairs, next to Ambu's room. Then just put my key under the mat.

NISHTA (goes to her cane) And I'll call Ambu to walk with you to the Press. (thumps on floor to summon Ambu)

ANIL (stares at key without moving) Like a coward

DHUN Your father is a violent man, Anil. And you're his only son. After reading Mother's warning on the Ashram board I heard him raging to some sadhaks about a British spy who's come to the Ashram, masquerading as an Indian *sannyasin*. Your father claims he's recruiting our young men for the British army ... and he threatened to thrash both of you if you dared ...

NISHTA (thumping floor more urgently) Why doesn't Ambu answer?

DHUN He's probably still at the Dispensary for your medicines, Nishta.

Anil, if you slip out the back way you'll never be seen!

ANIL (straightening, holds galley proofs close like a living presence) Thank you, Miss Dhun. But ... may the Divine Power and Presence within be my key. I am in Mother's hands. (bowing to each in turn) *Namaskar. Namaskar.* I bow to the same Being in you, my mothers. (goes out the front way)

NISHTA (watching him go, his wildflowers pressed to her heart) So young, and open already to the sight of God. While I ... (going to blackboard, stares at words) ... Still on the Dark Path of the Fathers ... have never seen God ... (almost angrily erasing words, turns to Dhun who is silently opening harmonium)

Yesterday Pavitra told me the latest radio news from Europe. 1,000 Luftwaffe planes launched over England by Göring. And the RAF pilots being sent up against them are mere babies. Babies! To clear the deadly skies! (throws down eraser)

No more English classes here on the *Gita*, Dhun! They're going to be held in the battlefields ... and skies! ... of England!

DHUN (touching harmonium keys lightly) Shall we chant some *slokas* from the *Gita*? One way to open the mind ... and to be with your young men from the class who are going away ...

NISHTA (pacing) The only ones left were Patrice and Anil. England about to be invaded. Paris has fallen ... I rode with my father under the Arc de Triomphe, Dhun, to the Peace Conference in Paris after the last war ... "*to end all wars.*" How ironic it was to correct the galley proofs of *The Ideal of Human Unity*, and read of the League of Nations Father fought for ... and literally died for ... And to be living through what he prophesied if there were no league of unity among nations. Blood. Bombs. Holocaust ... There must be some other way to teach the human race how to end our suicidal wars!

DHUN Isn't that why you've come here, Nishta? To learn the way to ... *The Life Divine*? (she is playing the harmonium softly) They say our Master has finally completed his great map to it ...

NISHTA (stops pacing; hushed) *The Life Divine*?

DHUN The manuscript is in Pritwisingh's office, ready for typing ... By whomever the Grace shall choose for the work. They say it's a great new force to be loosed ... the beginning of a world revolution, the spiritual revolution ...

(Nishta stares at Dhun who in her English-educated Parsee speech is making an almost devotional song of the words to her improvised music.)

NISHTA (voiceless) *Whomever the Grace shall choose*

DHUN Hasn't Mother told us that the Divine Life on earth is our evolutionary destiny? And that unless we realize the truth ... that we are members of one another, and act upon it ... we shall never have peace on earth? That's the work they've come for, *The Life Divine*.

NISHTA You work in Pritwisingh's office ... You've actually *seen* the manuscript, Dhun? (Dhun nods, continuing to play the harmonium with soft intensity. As in a dream, Nishta drifts to her worktable, touching the keys of her portable Corona prayerfully.)

Whomever the Grace shall choose... (to herself) I've been here five years now ... and all I've typed on this Corona are letters home trying to explain why *this* is my home ...

(Ambu [early 20s], a lithe light-skinned Indian sadhak and teacher of Hatha Yoga with spectacles and wild fuzzy hair, jacket over bare torso and white shorts, swings up outside staircase like a breeze, knocks briefly at Nishta's front door and enters. He is filled to bursting with news which he tries to contain with yogic calm.)

AMBU (placing Nishta's medicines on kitchen table, unwraps and lines them up) Your medicines, Nishta. Morning. Noon. Bedtime. As usual. (gives her a note)

And this chit for you. News: not as usual. A party of Americans. Coming from Madras, American Consulate. To see you.

(another note) This one: is invitation. Official. From Lieutenant Governor of Pondicherry. Inviting Americans to lunch today. Miss Margaret Woodrow Wilson must be sure to come.

NISHTA Sounds like a summons, not an invitation. Did you tell whoever brought it that there is no longer a Margaret Wilson here. (Ambu shrugs and grins slyly. Nishta sits slowly.)

Now why would anyone come from the Consulate...?

AMBU It is *American* Consulate. With *American* party. Pavitra will tell you. He brings more news: not as usual. (drawing her attention to medicine)

You are to take your medicine for morning now. As usual. And this one for noon. As usual. To take to Lieutenant Governor's lunch for you. Twelve noon. Sharp. Not as usual. Taking your cane. (turns to go, spinning on his heels)

NISHTA Wait, Ambu. What are you keeping from me?

AMBU Only gossip. Pavitra will tell you ... *true* news. From Mother. Excuse me. I go now for soup distribution. Mother is particular about Nishta's food. As usual. (skims out)

NISHTA (a deep sigh) Ambu is a trial...! But I suppose I'm as trying to him ... and that's why we're given each other; for mutual ... discipline ... What gossip can he mean, Dhun?

DHUN (hesitantly, after a pause) The Ashram is full of rumors. As usual ... in wartime ... (A smile and she returns to her harmonium, playing now with a hint of sadness.)

NISHTA Please, Dhun.

DHUN ... They are saying that ... Calcutta has been bombed by the Japanese Air Force preparing to invade India. And that Americans are coming from Madras ... to take you home. (a stunned silence)

NISHTA But ... *this is my home.* (springing up)
Dhun, they can't do that!

DHUN Your country can do anything, Nishta.

NISHTA Over my dead body!

DHUN (rising, prepares medicine in glass of water) It will be that if you don't take your medicine, dear heart. Is this the morning dose? As usual...?

NISHTA (ignoring medicine, resumes pacing) How did they learn in the Consulate that Nishta ... is the former Miss Wilson?... Still alive ... and in Pondicherry?

DHUN (gently persistent) Neither she nor Nishta will be alive if neither one takes her medicine. And there goes Nishta's chance of being the chosen one to type ... *The Life Divine.*

NISHTA (stops short) And how do *you* know so much, Dhunji?

DHUN I'll tell you if ... you take it consciously. As a warrior ... in the Spiritual Revolution.

NISHTA (with an eye on Dhun, takes it obediently) There. Now tell me!

DHUN (at last permitting her own deep feeling expression) Nishta! I was permitted to unwrap ... and touch ... the manuscript itself. In Sri Aurobindo's own handwriting. Waiting for the ... *choosing one.* Remember what he's told us?

"The one who chooses the Infinite ... is chosen by the Infinite." And there it is in Pritwisingh's office, wrapped in hand-marbled silk. Waiting for the *choosing one.*

(Nishta is overcome with emotion. Not daring to speak, she goes to box of lantern slides and lantern projector, busying herself with holding up to the light slides which she does not look at or see. Dhun, understanding completely, attempts to be helpful.)

These are for your magic lantern show in the Meditation Hall tonight? Wasn't Anil going to operate the projector? But if his father has forbidden him even to see you ... (going through box, and finds and holds up a slide to light) Your father ... on his Inauguration as

President of the United States? In 1912, I think you told us?.

NISHTA (automatically) 1913. Dhunji ...

(puts down slide; passionately) That is why I came to India. To learn the truth. Of the way to the Divine. To the Life Divine on earth. If I don't get to type the manuscript, I shall ... I shall ...

(Throws herself face down on couch in a burst of tears. Dhun is running to comfort her as Pavitra, a bronzed French Yogi with the erect bearing of a former French Army officer, looking more like a scientist-explorer than Ashramite, is seen marching up outside staircase bearing a tall Amazon Lily like a spear. He knocks quickly, lightly, while glancing gravely through sheaf of letters and cables he has taken from an ancient military case. Dhun opens door, greets Pavitra.)

DHUN It's Pavitra, Nishta. Please come in, brother. (They salute one another with folded palms in loving silence. Pavitra enters, observes Nishta compassionately, and signs to Dhun to be left alone with her.)

PAVITRA Only for a few minutes, Dhun. Then she may need ... some sisterly assistance, *peut-etre.* (Wide-eyed, Dhun goes into Nishta's bedroom. Pavitra draws up a chair to couch and waits quietly, standing. Slowly Nishta sits up and composes herself.)

NISHTA (faintly) Please sit down, Pavitra.

PAVITRA (sits, taking her hands in his with love) My dear Sister: I have just come from Mother ... she sends me to you with her love. And this (gives her the magnificently tall lily)
American Lily. For the fearless little Amazon of Princeton, she says. Who dares the inaccessible heights that call to be climbed. With this "*Invitation*" from Sri Aurobindo.

NISHTA (catching her breath as he reaches into his case)
Invitation?...

PAVITRA His poem ...
(hands her a card printed with the poem)

NISHTA (reading card aloud, hushed) *Who will come with me? Who will climb with me? I am the Spirit of Freedom*
(puts it down, unable to continue)

PAVITRA (after a sympathetic pause) Mother wishes you to know: this will be a day of decision for you. A day of ordeal ... most difficult. An Hour of God. Your past will rise up to confront you. In the inner war without escape.

NISHTA (voiceless) The *Gita.*

PAVITRA Exactly. Dying to the past. Transforming it. In the Divine consciousness. (placing letters and cables in her lap)
These have been brought to you by the American ship that sailed into Port last night. You have seen the ship. (she stares at her mail without answering) That cable bears the imprimatur: *The White House.* And the Seal of the United States of America. (she does not move)

I have brought to Mother and Sri Aurobindo the latest bulletin from Europe: Hitler proclaims he will march into England and announce the end of the war from Buckingham Palace. This summer. Precisely, on August 15th.

NISHTA (looks up startled) On Sri Aurobindo's birthday? How strange!

PAVITRA That would leave only America in the West ... unconquered. (hands her envelope with engraved insignia of U.S. Navy) ... Oh! And this was delivered from the ship.

NISHTA (opens and scans it quickly; a short laugh) Another ... invitation, Pavitra. This one from the Captain of the ship. To lunch with him at the Lieutenant Governor's mansion today. Now why...?

PAVITRA (picking up cable, again hands it to her) Perhaps the cable explains? It's from the White House in Washington. (as she opens and reads it reluctantly he rises)

We are all part of the world-wide battle with the past, Nishta. With the old world ... savage, inhuman ... anti-Divine. This is the secret war in which Mother and Sri Aurobindo are engaged. At this moment, deeply preoccupied with the Asuric sword at England's throat ... aimed to fall on Sri Aurobindo's birthday. You know how closely they are following the course of the war ... and intervening with their spiritual force. Remember Sri Aurobindo's poem ... and prediction ... about Hitler?

*"Thus driven he must stride on conquering all ... brutal,
invincible,
Until he meets upon his storm-swept road
A greater devil ... or thunderstroke of God."*

(he rises) Mother will see you tonight in her quarters. After your lantern show in the Meditation Hall on ... "America and the Ideal of Human Unity"?...

NISHTA Tell Mother how grateful I am for the Amazon Lily ... her inner help; and *Invitation*.

(rises; folding and replacing cable in envelope)

And that ... President Franklin D. Roosevelt has sent instructions to evacuate Americans from India on reports of Japan's threatened invasion. Our President implies ... (she looks away) ...

Implies that it is my duty, in view of the danger and of our country's neutrality in the war ... to return at once to America. (puts down cable and unopened letters)

PAVITRA (softly, compassionately)
What are you going to do, Nishta?

NISHTA Dress ... in my last good dress ...

PAVITRA To go to lunch with the Captain?

NISHTA ... To go to Pritwisingh's office. And ask ... no, beg! ... to be considered as a typist for the manuscript of *The Life Divine*. (they look long into each other's eyes)

PAVITRA (nodding) You will find in it the way to Human Unity. And peace. For your country ... for the whole human race. The way to the radical transformation of human nature necessary if humanity is to survive.

(Amazon Lily held high as Pavitra bore it—like a spear—Nishta sees him to the door. Returning to her desk she places Lily in vase, cables and unopened letters to one side.)

NISHTA (as if restored to life, calls out ringingly) Dhunji, my Sister! Will you help me find the finest dress in my wardrobe? What's left of it? (Together, like two conspirators, they rummage through the scant remains of Nishta's once opulent wardrobe, Nishta improvising a melody to the lines of Sri Aurobindo's *Invitation*.)

O Sri Aurobindo! *"Who will come with you? Who will climb with you? O Spirit of Freedom! Spirit of Pride!"* I will come with you! I will climb with you!

(holding up a flounced summer dress, style fashionable in the 1930s) How will this be for the climbing, Dhunji?

DHUN (gaily; Nishta's joy is contagious) Well, it does have a flared skirt! But you'll need hob-nail boots, my dear, not those petite *chappels* for the climb! *What* are you going to climb, by the way...? And with *whom*, may I ask?

NISHTA The inaccessible heights to the Infinite!
(whirling Dhun with the dress) With Sri Aurobindo and Mother, of course! Who else calls us to scale those inner Himalayas beyond Space and Time? (dances into bedroom to dress, improvising melody to "Invitation")

DHUN (following, pauses to glance at cable and unopened letters) It will give you more body, too, for your luncheon with the Americans. You'll look like the Margaret Wilson ... they knew ...

NISHTA (calling back as she changes; laughingly)
... Who disappeared?

DHUN They seem to have found her out! Shouldn't you open your mail to know what they're plotting?

(Outside, a dark-skinned Bengali, tall, rigid, holding himself with haughty pride [Jaganath], is guiding an American woman [Madge] up the staircase. Madge is stylishly, even dramatically dressed like the Broadway actress she is. The same age as Nishta, she looks much older, ravages of worldly experience and disillusionment ... and the tropical heat ... expertly covered by heavy makeup. As they ascend, Madge looks about her with great curiosity.)

NISHTA It's always the same old plot: to get me back to America. But I'll have other use for my typewriter now, Dhunji, than to answer their letters ... (Jagannath raps at door with sharp authority.)

DHUN Are you seeing anyone, Nishta?

NISHTA (calling out from bedroom gaily) If it's anyone from Pritwisingh's office ... I certainly am! Let the Divine in, Dhun! I'll be ready in a moment.

(Dhun opens door. Before she has time to more than gasp and collect herself, Jagannath strides in past her grimly to survey the room for his son. Madge steps into the spartan quarters behind him and sinks into the nearest chair fanning herself, overcome with emotion.)

JAGANNATH (to Dhun formally, unsmilingly, Bengalese accent tinged with a German inflection) Is Miss Veelson at home? She has a visitor here. From America. We want to see her. At once.

MADGE (taking a rupee from her handbag) You can leave now, sir. Thank you for finding Miss Wilson's house for me.

JAGANNATH (with a withering look) It is not for you, Madame. Keep your money, please, for servants.

(to Dhun) Call Miss Veelson out, Dhun. I want to know where is my son.

DHUN (obviously intimidated) He is not here, Jagannath.

JAGANNATH He came here this morning. Where is he!

DHUN At Ashram Press ... with the proofs of ...
(Nishta enters wearing the flared summer dress and stops short, looking in disbelief from Jagannath to Madge who rises emotionally.)

JAGANNATH Proofs? Of what? Where is my son, Miss Veelson?! (But now the women have eyes only for each other. They exclaim together.)

MADGE Margaret Wilson. O Marga. Marga!
Marga, my darling.

NISHTA Madge ... Oh, but it can't be ... *Madge.*

MADGE They said you were dead ...

NISHTA How did you find me?

MADGE How many years has it been? O Marga, Marga, I can't *believe* it!

JAGANNATH (to Dhun, a glint of steel in his eyes, raising his voice) There is also a British ... *monk* ... who looks for Miss Veelson. I will bring him here also.

NISHTA (extricating herself from Madge's voluminous embrace, turns on Jagannath with fire) You will do nothing of the kind, Jagannath. Thank you for showing my friend the way here. But you can leave now. (Flings door open wide. Jagannath looks from one to the other American lady, and clasping his Brahmin thread tightly, goes to doorway.)

MADGE But *Marga!* Do you know who the English

monk ... is?! He's your old flame from Princeton and Cambridge, darling, come to see the Ashram and the Mother here. It's *Eliot!* Tommy Eliot *himself!* He thought you were dead too, Margaret Woodrow Wilson!

(Jagannath pauses on threshold, then grimly strides out. Now it's Nishta's turn to fall into the nearest chair. She begins to laugh helplessly, Madge joining her; and soon both are laughing as uncontrollably as schoolgirls.)

NISHTA (when she is able to speak, draws Madge close, between gasps of laughter and tears) Dhunji ... this is ... my closest friend ... from childhood and ... school days ... a Broadway star and ... Madge this is Dhun ... my neighbor and dear Ashram sister ... Not *Eliot* come with you Madge?! It can't be ... Tommy ... *Eliot!*

MADGE (wiping her eyes, observing mascara on handkerchief in dismay) Well, he didn't come with us from Madras, but from Calcutta. It's been bombed by the Japanese Air Force. Darling, you don't have any *mirrors* in this co-ed *convent* I suppose ... ?

NISHTA (showing her into bedroom) I do. (to Dhun) We grew up together in Princeton Village. And Madge became one of our finest stage actresses ... and ... and ... *Eliot?! It's not possible!* Oh, Dhunji! We can't have Jagannath come back again! If you could find him ... a tall Englishman in ... in *monk's* robes?! ...

DHUN A *sannyasin's* ochre robes...?

NISHTA God knows! ... and bring him here ...

DHUN (uncertainly) I've been called to work in Pritwisingh's office today. And aren't you expected at the Lieutenant Governor's palace soon?

NISHTA (as if recalled from another world) Pritwisingh's office? Where you saw *The Life Divine* manuscript?

MADGE (returning from bedroom, briskly now) Yes *indeed* you're expected at the Lieutenant Governor's palace, and *very* soon, darling! Summoned by the United States *Navy*, the American *Consulate*, and ... you won't believe *this*, either! ... Well! ... None other than our Eminent Presbyterian Divine, the Very Very Reverend George ... remember him from Princeton Chapel? ... came down from the Mission in Calcutta to our Consulate in Madras. And when he learned *you* were in Pondicherry, to be evacuated with us by the American navy on rumours that you were alive and in an *ashram* ... nothing could keep him from coming to shepherd home the prodigal daughter of his close friend and Presbyterian Elder the late President Wilson! Shall we go now?

NISHTA I ... I must ... get myself together, Madge ...

MADGE (sympathetically) Of course, darling! But I should get back to that Ashram Reception Parlor with the good news! ...

NISHTA (faintly) What good news?

MADGE Why, that Margaret Woodrow Wilson has reap-

peared! In the flesh! They're waiting on pins and needles for my report. All but your old Madge thought she was dead. I *knew* you were indestructible ... Your father's little Amazon who would dare the Devil himself to discover new ways out of Hell!

DHUN I can show you back to the Reception Parlor ... if that will help ...

MADGE Indeed it will! They've had time to get Margaret's documents from the Foreigners' Office ... Our ship's Captain has been waving our President's orders at them ...

NISHTA Orders?!

MADGE ... To bring you home at any cost to the Navy, Marga. We're still neutral in this hellish war, God forgive us! And if anything should happen to Woodrow Wilson's daughter when the Japanese invade India's East Coast! ... Pondicherry's already choked with refugees from the North ... We saw them setting up house on the beach, poor souls, while Pondicherry itself is being sandbagged. Have you seen the streets?

NISHTA (nods; suddenly embracing Madge) Oh this war, Madge ... We've heard such stories from the European refugees here ... A Polish woman sadhak who escaped the Nazis' gas ovens ... the atrocities ... (They hold each other tightly, a moment.)

MADGE (gravely yet simply) You asked why I've come all this way to India searching for you? I left Hollywood for a bit part in a London play ... just to prove to myself I could take the bombing of London and show my solidarity with the English people ... they're amazing under fire, as you know! And before I left L.A. ...

NISHTA (looking into her eyes searchingly)]
You saw my sister.

MADGE Yes, I got the Ashram address from her. Nellie's life is falling apart. Like mine. Like the whole world's, it seems. She's desperately ill ... and alone. Mac divorced her. We need you home, Marga.

DHUN (who has been closing harmonium; to Nishta quietly) Shall I take the harmonium home, Nishta? We may not be able to sing together again ...

NISHTA (as if startled out of a dream) What? Oh, the harmonium? Please leave it here, Dhun. (accompanies Madge and Dhun out to verandah)

And when you're in Pritwisingh's office ... do tell him ... (Halts, sways; and catches Madge's arm. At foot of staircase, looking up at her with luminous eyes, is a tall Englishman in robes of a *sannyasin*, his skin bronzed and weather-beaten to a fine dark parchment.)

MADGE (whispers to Dhun) That's ... Eliot ... (She makes a discreetly silent gesture of greeting to him. But he has eyes only for Nishta, standing at the top of the staircase. Dhun and Madge go out to the street, leaving the two gazing at one another, beloved ghosts risen from a dead past. Both remain motionless, caught in a

still, eternal moment of memory. There is a low whistle from Garden. Only then does Eliot stir, turning to acknowledge his young guide's help. A rustle in the shrubbery ... and Anil, barely glimpsed, is gone.)

NISHTA (almost inaudible) Eliot. Come in ...

Lights Fade Out

ACT ONE

Scene 2: The Past (Nishta's quarters. That morning.)

Memory scenes, played before white panels in Meditation Hall area as in an old-fashioned home lantern show with slides, flow rapidly and uninterruptedly. Only furniture throughout Nishta's memories of the past are a small baby-grand piano and bench.

Light rises on Memory Scene 1

Slide 1: 1914: White House Room in which President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, now Margaret's room. A strange light-ray illuminates mantel and sign. Margaret (28) wearing a black mourning shawl stands looking down staircase at Eliot (29) in British army uniform. They are in same position as at end of I.

MARGARET Eliot. Come in ... (he ascends and enters)

ELIOT (touching her hand gently) What an ordeal for you ... being hostess for your father at these White House parties ... with your mother barely gone ... (She goes to piano, beginning to play the World War I Song "*Over There*" blurring the keys.)

I came to say ... goodbye. I'm shipping out tonight.

MARGARET (stifled voice) And the parties and teas ... entertaining ... go on here. Just as if there weren't a war over there. It's good that my mother left before all this agony broke out. And now ... you're leaving ...

ELIOT (grinning) Not for the same place, necessarily. Ah ... I brought you a little ... ah, book from ... where I hope to be shipped, eventually ...

MARGARET (to the piano keys) India!

ELIOT ... Or wherever I'm sent. To perform my duty without attachments as Ramakrishna teaches. (places book with Ramakrishna's dark smiling face before her)

MARGARET Not your little black saint again! (but she leafs through book)

ELIOT Shades of racism in *you*, Meg? Didn't you choose this room ... where your Civil War President signed the Emancipation Proclamation ... for your own in the White House? (sits on piano bench beside her)

I know your mother returned to the South so you wouldn't be born a Yankee ... But I thought that this life around, your soul chose

where in the world ... A chaos of destruction ... and we Americans bury our heads in comfy material sands ... And you English Indophiles in the mystic sands of ... of *reincarnation*! And I ... I'll never see you again in *this* incarnation! (flings herself upon piano keyboard in a passion of discords)

ELIOT (his arms about her) You with your love of freedom, Margaret ... when will you find freedom from your fear of death, which is really a fear of life?... (she disengages herself from his embrace)

... and love? When will you let go of your bondages ... to your famous father and White House and white family tree and white religion of white superiority? We've all been all races and all colours of the rainbow in our souls' eternal pilgrimage to the Divine Life on earth. When will you dare to surrender your fear, to ... life? Your pride, to ... love?
(he embraces and kisses her; she looks up at him startled.)

Light fades out; then rises on Memory Scene 2

Slide 2: 1917. White House Foyer and Staircase to President Wilson's Study. White House Servants Issac and Mary enter carrying Margaret's luggage and excitedly sharing newspaper clipping about her signing tour for the Red Cross. Margaret (31), highly coiffured, at height of her career as a concert singer, sweeps in triumphantly. She is fawned over by the servants who show her the press notices delightedly. President Wilson formally dressed as always, appears with briefcase at top of staircase. His harassed face lights up as he sees Margaret. She runs up to him with a glad cry and embraces him ardently.

WILSON Welcome home, Little Girl! We hear you've brought in thousands of dollars for the Red Cross. You're looking as lovely as your voice!
(glancing at watch approvingly) And punctual as usual.

MARGARET I had to make a number of trains to be on time for lunch ... with my favorite beau! We do have an appointment?...

WILSON Indeed! And we all look forward to lunching with our celebrity!

MARGARET We? All?

WILSON I had to include Franklin Roosevelt and his Navy staff. Another emergency.

MARGARET Ohh!

WILSON (at her crestfallen look, gallantly)
And I'm proud of my golden lark!

MARGARET You promised we could be by ourselves when I came home from this tour ...

WILSON (offering his arm with Southern courtliness) About your request, Little Girl ... You're doing so splendidly here. Why do you want to go overseas to sing for our troops? (a fatherly twinkle)

You don't expect to meet your British Tommy on the French battlefields, do you? Though I pray when he comes home you'll marry him and settle down ... for my peace of mind!

MARGARET (ignoring the jibe, takes his arm, earnestly)

I feel like such a slacker, Father. All this glamorous publicity over there ... while our boys are fighting ... and dying ... without fanfare over there.

WILSON (with a paternal smile and a pat) It's wonderfully courageous of you, Little Girl. But I can't give you permission to go.

MARGARET (pulling away from him; with fire)

I'm not your "Little Girl" anymore, but a grown woman wishing to serve the Cause!

WILSON (interrupts, frowning) At the *front*? In *France*? But women don't *do* those things, Margaret!

MARGARET It's time we did! Your nineteenth century paternalism is stifling not only to me, Father, but to the whole Suffragist movement fighting for democracy ... at *home*! What of your New Freedom for *all* of our people?!

WILSON (sets his jaw, sternly) However that may be, the fact is that you are the American President's daughter. Your going to the front in France would be an unnecessary responsibility for the French Government.

MARGARET I'll be with *our* Forces, Father, not the French Government's!

WILSON I said *No*, Margaret. We can't have the President's daughter in jeopardy when all concentration must be on fighting the forces of evil. Shall we go to lunch ... in peace?

MARGARET (passionately) There will be no peace until we fight the forces of evil ... the bigotries and injustices and inequalities in our own ranks! And in ourselves! Have lunch in peace with your trembling toadies afraid of their shadows! And yours! (Sweeps out, barely hiding her tears; then suddenly turns back to fling her arms around her father and kiss him.)

(Song: "*Memories*" sung by Margaret)

Lights fade; then rise on Memory Scene 3

Slide 3: 1933. White House, Second Floor Family Room, during FDR's Administration. Margaret (48) is at the piano singing for family guests of FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt. Only guest visible is Eliot in dinner jacket, one sleeve empty. His penetratingly questioning regard is fixed on Margaret with an intensity of which she is very aware. She brings the song to an abrupt conclusion and rises from the piano as if to escape. Eleanor Roosevelt enters very concerned, to take her aside.

ELEANOR My dear, *dear* Margaret! There are rumours that

ELEANOR My dear, dear Margaret! There are rumours that you intend to leave the country. Not for *India* I hope! With Japan's invasion of Manchuria, the whole East is a powderkeg. Franklin is so anxious, and ... it would be so *dangerous* for you! What *are* you going to do, Margaret?

MARGARET (with a quick sidelong glance at Eliot; evasively) I am simply studying ... Eastern thought.

ELEANOR (relieved) Not *seriously* ... with Tommy Eliot's group on the so-called "Mystic Path" as I've been told? (Eliot approaches them; Eleanor turns to him)

Tom, is it your Indian mysticism and dreamy fancies of reincarnation turning our Margaret's head from her duties?

MARGARET (laughingly tries to edge away) It's your guest Henry Ford who's so interested in reincarnation, Eleanor.

ELEANOR You belong in America, Margaret! Helping us fight the fear and isolationism and depression in *our* country! Here and now! Woodrow's daughter could never be an escapist! (Taking Margaret's hand almost beseechingly)

All the democracies are in peril today. Our only hope for peace in the world lies in the League of Nations your father fought and died for. You with your ability to speak and write and organize and teach ... look at that model League you created at Georgetown University! Your knowledge of politics! Why, you can be a powerful help in our struggle at home!

ELIOT (softly) Perhaps there are other ways to help. The great souls and mystics of Indian ... even the dreamers ... may have something to teach the West about peace.

ELEANOR But there must be *fighters* for that dream of peace! Like Margaret's father! (turns to Margaret with renewed vigour) What did your father say to you, Margaret, when you begged him not to tour the country to fight for the League of Nations? Remember you told us ... after the Great War ... that his doctors warned him, in 1919, it would be *disastrous* to his health?...

Light fades; then brightens to Memory Scene 4

Slide 4: 1919. White House Family Room, Wilson Administration. Margaret (33) is at the piano singing "Memories." Eliot, recently returned from the Front wounded, has a haunted, desperate expression as he paces behind the piano. She is acutely aware of the suppressed violence he can barely control.

ELIOT (suddenly bursting out) *Memories*. Of hell. For what? Nothing, nothing! *Nothingness!* And your country's politicians are turning their backs on the one possibility, the one hope for peace ... your father's League of Nations! (throws himself on bench beside her) After the spell in India and being sent back to Europe, I couldn't believe the degeneration I saw. The charnel house we were learning to "live" in. You know; you were in France. How can you play that ... sentimental ... garbage? *Memories!*

(President Wilson, formally dressed as always and carefully carrying a sheaf of documents as always, enters drawn by the music.

Eliot springs to attention with a mocking, left-handed salute that is at the same time one of respect and desperate longing.)

Sir! The shattered peoples of the world look to you as their saviour! ... all except your own countrymen ... who seem to prefer their cars and booze to any League of Nations that might curtail their freedom to guzzle without interference by an outsider. Because they've never had *their* country invaded and pillaged and ruined! ... it's always been an inside and civil job, hasn't it? Believe me, I respect you, sir, as a prophet ... and fighter. But I don't see any hope ahead ... for your country or mine or the whole damned planet Excuse me, sir ...

WILSON (drily) You're excused, Tom.

ELIOT ... until our wild beast-human nature is radically ... *radically* ... changed!

WILSON (has returned the salute; smiling but grave) Does the race have time for that, Son?

MARGARET (has continued to play, changing song to Southern Gospel, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"; to the piano keys) What are you going to do, Father?

(Instead of answering, Wilson joins her softly in the singing, his voice clear, mellow, beautiful. Eliot draws back into the shadows, shut out ... a lonely spectre-spectator. As the song dies away, father and daughter are caught in the magic of the moment, enrapt in the deep loving hush. After a pause, she repeats her question, a catch in her voice.)

What ... are you going to do, Father? (he kisses her head as if in blessing, and without answering, starts out; rising, she takes his hand beseechingly)

But all the doctors have warned you! Making speeches across the country, endless meetings ... a long tour would be dangerous to your health! Perhaps fatal!

WILSON (warming to the love in her voice, but smiling) You finally got *your* way, Meg ... and toured the battlefields across France singing. Does my little Amazon tell *me* how it's dangerous to tour the battlefields here, speaking? To bring America into the League of Nations ... as the veterans like our Tom pray ... for the peace of the world? (setting his lantern jaw grimly) I must go directly to our people. It's my *duty* to go, Little Girl ... Pardon me! Margaret Woodrow Wilson! It's my duty to go ... *and I am going!*

(They follow him out. She kisses him ardently. Song: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* fades into distant crowd voices.)

Light fades; then rises on Memory Scene 5

Slide 5: 1936. New York City Public Library on Fifth Avenue, Entrance and Stone Lions; American Nazi Parade on 42nd Street and Times Square; New York Times Building. News headlines: SPANISH CIVIL WAR; NAZIS IN RHINELAND; ITALY ANNEXES ETHIOPIA; LEAGUE OF NATIONS FAILS. Lights fade and flicker with lightning rapidity. Eliot, carrying a now wilted bouquet, paces at foot of library steps. Margaret (late 40s) emerges from library as from an enchanted world. She looks about, caught in the flickering nightmare, like a lost child. Eliot leaps up the stairs to her two at a time.



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damn worried! Didn't we have an appointment to meet at these lions when the library closed?

MARGARET (accepting offered bouquet apologetically) Dear dear Eliot! I was locked in the library all night ... reading about that book you suggested, you know? *The Gita*? Only this was *Essays on the Gita* by someone named Sri ... Sir? ... Aurobindo? ... He opened a new world to me ... and I never even heard the guards locking up the old one!

(Cry of newsboy: "LEAGUE OF NATIONS FAILS!" is drowned by Sounds Of Blaring German Marching Band playing "DEUTSCHLAND UBER ALLES." Shrinking from the cacophony and glaring, flashing headlines, she tries to cover her eyes, then her ears, with the flowers.)

ELIOT (anxious and fuming) You promised to tell me the doctor's verdict! What did he say? What's the prognosis?

MARGARET (murmuring in despair)
"League of Nations Fails" ...

ELIOT The doctor's news, not the NEW YORK TIMES! (she looks him in the eye steadily for a moment, then turns away;

ELIOT (almost shakes her back to face him)
Margaret, what did the Doctor say? (she is silent)

Look, I've heard of a mental healer who is supposed to be a great psychic. Right here in New York. And Lois knows of a healer in California ... miraculous cures. And your sister lives in Los Angeles. You could go out there and stay with her while you are ... cured ...

MARGARET (after a pause)
What do you know of this author ... Aurobindo?

ELIOT (studies her expressionless face) We'll find out from Swami. Hasn't he asked you for help in translating the *Gospel* of my "little brown saint Ramakrishna"?

MARGARET Yes, and we've started working together ...
(A last deafening Blast Of Brass Band drowns her out.)

ELIOT (almost a shout) What? What? Never mind. (taking her arm with his good one, fiercely)

There's going to be another World War ... just as your father prophesied. Let's get out of this madhouse, Meg. (steers her out, grimly)

(MUSIC: Seance, foreboding, undercurrent of *Christmas Carol*.)

Lights flicker out, then rise on Memory Scene 6

Slide 6: 1936. *Winter Night, New York City Village Street, Washington Square*. Row of Village House-fronts, Christmas-wreathed. Cheerful street-lamp lights, glistening snow. Slide is that of an unreal, painted Christmas card facade of peace; suddenly disrupted

by Margaret's entrance, coatless and hatless, wrapping scarf about

her shoulders as if in hasty flight. Eliot comes out into the night looking for her; and runs after her determinedly.

ELIOT (catching her back, sternly) You can't run out like this on your friends! The seance was arranged as a healing session for you!

MARGARET (in tears) But Eliot you know, you *know* I'm not interested in mediums but in finding the Divine! ... The *Truth* that cures! The *Truth*! Only the *Truth*!

ELIOT (anguished) Do you have *time* to find it? Didn't your doctor tell you that you have only a few more months to live?

MARGARET Then I must find the *Truth now*!

ELIOT (as she struggles to be free of his embrace and run on)
Marga, listen to me! ... *Listen!*

MARGARET Only if you can tell me where ... to find it ...

ELIOT (thoughts racing) India ... India ... (inspired)
Marga! There's an Indian speaking tonight ... Dhangopal Mukherjee ... who knows the author of that book ... your Bible, you said ... *Essays on the Gita*. The one you were locked in the library with, remember?

MARGARET (stops struggling, breathlessly)
Knows Sri Aurobindo???

ELIOT Worked with him in the *Swadeshi* days

MARGARET *Swa* ... what?!

ELIOT His revolutionary days. Mukherjee is talking about Yoga tonight. Just arrived from India ... and I remember hearing the name Aurobindo spoken of by Swami as the greatest living Yogi in India ...

MARGARET He's alive *now*?!

ELIOT Yes; and that he was educated in England at

MARGARET (with burning eagerness) Where, *where*?

ELIOT Cambridge ... my college ...

MARGARET Where is the *Indian speaking tonight*?
Do you know?

ELIOT (fumbling in breast pocket)
I have the address somewhere ... here ...

MARGARET (seizes his arm) *Let's go!*

(She drags him away. He looks back at the house as if lightning has struck the scene unexpected to reveal a new and totally unfamiliar place. As unexpectedly Margaret bursts into a joyous

"HALLELUJAH!" singing and whirling before the street lamp, light bursting from it as unexpectedly. Eliot throws his jacket about her shoulders. Hand in hand, two exhilarated, mad-cap children, they dance out hailing a taxi and singing-shouting the "HALLELUJAH" Chorus together like intoxicated celebrants.)
(MUSIC: "HALLELUJAH," Full symphonic chorus fades to Indian temple music.)

Light fades out; then rises on Memory Scene 7

Slide 7: 1936. August Afternoon. Manhattan Town House, East 94th Street and Fifth Avenue. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center. Steps lead up from street with its view of Central Park, to partially open door with glimpses of a mysteriously exotic Indian interior graced with bust of Sri Ramakrishna. Margaret enters from Fifth Avenue escorted, or rather, pantingly followed by her suitor (late 50s), well-heeled, obviously very prosperous and as obviously infatuated by the glamour of the American "Princess" he is courting.

SUITOR Miss Wilson ... (presents bouquet)

(Margaret, deep-set eyes shadowed ... the only trace of her illness ... by a fashionable wide-straw summer hat, carries her beaded handbag and suitor's bouquet tightly to her heart, and seems to be floating in an ecstasy. Suitor can neither penetrate nor comprehend. As they enter, Swami Nikhilananda a charismatic Indian in ochre robe, stands in doorway beaming down upon Margaret.)

SUITOR (catching up to her; in astonishment)
Is *this* where you have your appointment, Miss Wilson?!

MARGARET (as if recalled suddenly from some heavenly station, almost singing her joy) Yes, and I'm late. Thank you for the pleasant walk; Central Park is so heavenly this time of year! (starts to float toward Swami)

SUITOR (detains her with difficulty, dismayed)
You're working for a ... a ... coloured priest?

MARGARET (a mischievous smile)
With. A Swami. From India.

SUITOR (shocked) Miss Wilson! ... Doing *what*?

MARGARET Helping him translate the Gospel of an illiterate coloured Master into non-Shakespearean prose. Would you like to publish it, Mr. Compton?

SUITOR What are you doing here?

MARGARET Discovering, among other things, that God is also God-ess.

SUITOR God is a ... a ... *She*? ...

MARGARET (wickedly enjoying his consternation) The brown Master was madly in love with Her ... the Divine Mother, black Kali. ... Really, Mr. Compton, the Swami is waiting ...

SUITOR (desperately) But I've come all the way from Chicago, Miss Wilson ... to learn how I stand with you! On my proposal of marriage ...

MARGARET (demurely, trying to slip with decorum from his grasp) Please ... not on the street ...

SUITOR Or in the Park? Or at lunch? Or the Opera?
Or ... Is there *any* place you'll give me an answer?

MARGARET (suddenly passionately sincere and unable to restrain any longer her delirium of joy) How can I marry when I'm already desperately, head-over-heels, in love? And he's finally ... at last, at last, at long long last ... (tremblingly takes envelope with Indian stamps from her bag) ... Answered me?!

SUITOR Who ... is he ... ?

MARGARET He ... is also that She ... Though in this incarnation his *Shakti* is white, not black. Goodbye, Mr. Compton!

(Floats up steps to disappear within mysterious interior. Swami Nikhilananda greets her with folded palms, bowing her inside. Baffled suitor, his mind blown, is left on the street gaping after them. Music of India rises.)

Summer light fades; then interior light rises on Memory Scene 8

Slide 8: Swami's Study, Sri Ramakrishna Center. It is hung with photographs of Temple at Dakshineswar, India, Holy Mother Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and Temple statue of black Mother Kali with necklace of human skulls. Incense burns before the bust of Sri Ramakrishna. Eliot enters with Manuscript of "Gospel Of Ramakrishna," giving it to Swami as Margaret floats in. She looks from one to the other wide-eyed, unable to speak, then takes out the letter of many pages from India, smoothing its signature again and again.

ELIOT (sensing her state, softly) You've done a beautiful job on the "Gospel" translation, Marga ... Hasn't she, Swami. (Swami nods, beaming, and brings her a chair.)

Marga?... (She tries to speak; cannot. Sinking into chair, covers her face and bursts into sobs of joy. Eliot kneels beside her, gently removing pages from the flow of tears and glancing at signature.)

MARGARET (when she can) He's answered. He's answered. *O Eliot!* (Throws her arms about him. Now he is wide-eyed in wonder. It is the first time it's ever happened.)

SWAMI (beaming) She is mad for God; and He answers.

ELIOT (takes off Margaret's hat and pince-nez without which She looks like a very young girl; wiping her streaming tears and cleaning her glasses, to Swami—himself awed) It's from the one you said is the greatest living Yogi in India.

SWAMI Sri Aurobindo?
(Eliot nods and shows him the signature)

From time to time a Treasure Mine of Spiritual Power depends on earth in the form of an Incarnation. Miss Wilson is on her way to that Treasure.

ELIOT (pauses, startled; then returns letters to Margaret with her pince-nez, looking at her as if she were already far away from him; softly) When are you leaving for India, Marga?...

MARGARET (swallowing the glad tears; a halting whisper) He says ... when I've gone ... some way on the Path ... here ... O Eliot. Eliot. *Eliot*. (strokes his upturned face with trembling hands of joy; and suddenly kisses him)

Interior light of Memory fades out

Lights rise on: The Present

(Nishta is standing at the top of the staircase of her verandah. The tall Englishman in robes of a *sannyasin* stands facing her in the doorway.)

NISHTA Oh ... *Eliot*.

ELIOT It's ... Udarananda ... now.
(a long pause; softly, with emotion)
Margaret. I thought you were ... dead .

NISHTA (faintly) Please come in.

ELIOT Later. I'm being taken for *darshan* of the Mother. Soon. *O Margaret!*

NISHTA (a smile) It's ... Nishta ... now.

ELIOT I came to ask guidance of Sri Aurobindo ...

NISHTA We see him at *darshan* ... only three times a year. But the Mother whenever ...

ELIOT ... and find you. Living.

NISHTA (a pause) Who is taking you to the Mother?

ELIOT A French sadhak ...

NISHTA Pavitra?

ELIOT (nodding) With a young Indian boy. Who hopes to join the Royal Air Force. It was he who showed me where Margaret Wilson ... where *Nishta* ... is living.

NISHTA (after a pause; low)
"Living" ... that was Eliot's favorite word.

ELIOT Ah, Nishta! How is it with you now?

NISHTA Udarananda: it seems to me that I lived most of

my life in a dream of mental abstractions, before coming to India. And now ...

ELIOT Now?

NISHTA For the first time I am waking up.

ELIOT (nods) *Living*. Nishta ... is living.
(Starts back down the staircase. Then pausing, turns to look back at Nishta as if to assure himself that he is not dreaming; and goes out. Nishta remains motionless, looking after him; then slowly returns to her flat. Alone at her desk she tries to look through her mail, but her thoughts are far away ... still in the past. One letter appears to disturb her; it is postmarked Los Angeles.)

NISHTA Los Angeles. Oh, Nellie ...

(Opens it reluctantly. Puts it aside ... reads it with increasingly heavy heat ... Opens her little Corona typewriter indecisively. Bright morning light fades within and outside the flat. Sky darkens. Distant Rumble of thunder. Fog. Warning and Booming. OM of Ship's Horn heard from the sea. Placing stationery in typewriter, Nishta begins to type. The room darkens.)

NISHTA (to herself as she types) Dearest Baby Sister: (hands in her lap; to the stationery) No. You're a grown woman now, Nellie! Not the cry-baby anymore

VOICE (NELL' s) (warm, cultivated, but with an edge to it, from depths of the darkening room, drily) ... Not the cry-baby you had to slap and ... mother back to smiles, Marghee?

(Nishta looks up startled. Moving towards her desk in the shadows is her sister Nell-Mrs. Eleanor Randolph Wilson McAdoo as she looked in 1937, the year her sister Margaret disappeared into India. Wearing a glamorous night robe, ultra-fashionable coiffeur, disheveled, make-up like a movie star's of the '30s, now smudged by tears, Nell approaches Nishta, a bottle of sleeping tablets in one hand, old family album in the other. She appears tense, on verge of hysteria, but in tight control.)

NELL (challengingly, huskily)
Well? Have you found the secret in India?

NISHTA (voiceless) Secret? ..

NELL Whatever it was that made you disappear from life ... at the height of your singing career ... Deserting your family ... what's left of us ... your friends and admirers and suitors and ... What was it for? (picks up book from Nishta's desk)
Yoga and Its Objects. By Sorry Aery-Bingo.

NISHTA (rigidly) You know how to pronounce his name, Nell.

NELL So Sorry. (picks up another)
Conversations. The Mother. (reading from it)
"What do you want the Yoga for? To get power? To attain peace and calm? To serve humanity? None of these motives is sufficient to show that you are meant for the Path." (puts down book)
What do you want the Yoga for? Whatever *that* is!

(leans across desk; intensely, accusingly)

Why did you leave us?! So ... so utterly, Marga?

(Nishta sits staring at the typewriter. Only when Nell reaches for the glass of water on her desk preparing to take the sleeping tablets does she spring up and snatch the bottle out of her sister's hand.)

NISHTA (voice shaking) Are you going to sleep your life away, Nell Baby?

(They glare at one another. Suddenly Nishta takes her sister in her arms. Nell collapses, sobbing, clinging to her.)

NELL Mac's left me, Marghee. Because I couldn't get him into the White House. I'm sick of it all. The lies. The egos. Ambitions. False friends ... Nobody's left who loves me or even cares ... whether I sleep or die. Why are you so far away from us? On the other side of the world?...

(Nishta tenderly puts Nell in her chair and kneels beside her, stroking her hair until she is calmer.)

NISHTA I just became sick of the lies and egos sooner than you, Nell Baby. And from the moment I discovered that realization of God, of the truth, was possible ... that to live and act *only* in that consciousness was possible ... I longed for it. Desperately. Till the time came when life without it seemed utterly empty and futile.

(lifting Nell's head, looking into her eyes with intense love)

Yoga? Is union. With the one Divine in everything. I couldn't think of anything else but to lose myself. In Him. In that One. In His Love ... And then when I learned that Sri Aurobindo was *living* ... on earth; with us ... and could show me the Way to that Love ...

NELL (whispering) But didn't your doctor tell you you'd die if you went to India? The heat and ... And when you came out to L.A. you'd have nothing to do with mental healings or powers or ... or love, Marghee. You could never give yourself ... or lose yourself in a love. Not even Eliot's ...

NISHTA (looking away) It was the Eternal ... Beloved's I was looking for.

NELL And Father's! Remember when we played house, you were always Father? And we looked up to you as our leader? (laughing at the memory despite herself) Looked up to you is right! Our Amazon sister climbing cliffs out of our sight! And to the top of the house we were building in Princeton! Shivering in our little boots for fear you'd break your neck! We were *always* calling you to come down or come back, all our lives. I see it now that I'm writing about our family; ... O Margh-ee ... come; back! Come back! I'm so sick of my life I could die ... (puts her head down on desk, nearly toppling vase with Amazon Lily)

NISHTA (moving vase; gently) When you let go of the past in your book, dearest ... it will let go of you. And you'll get well.

NELL (sits up determinedly) No, *I won't* get well! Not *that* way! You're just excusing your ... your selfish running away to India! You who never *ever* ran away, even when you cut your hair short in Princeton Village to look like Father ... and all the boys

teased you! And you fought them single-handed, even when they came at you in packs!

NISHTA (laughing) While you and Jessie clung to each other and cheered me on ...

NELL Well, we were proud of your pluckiness! Even though *we* didn't *dare* fight the boys. We were *proper* little ladies! But you ... I ... (springs up like a child, gleaming with delight, coming alive at the memory)

Oh, you were *fierce*, Marghee! My fiery big sister ... who fought all *my* battles too, for me! How I loved you ... and love you still, so so much, my fierce little mother who never told us a lie ... and protected us, like Father ... And now you've left me all alone ...

NISHTA (quickly before Nell can weep again; fiercely) You are *not* alone, Nellie! We are *all-one*, not *a-lone*! See how we're together now over these thousands and thousands of miles? Because there is no distance in God's love! Just as there is no death or disease in the love of our eternal Beloved!

NELL (timidly, longing but almost afraid to believe her) Is that really true, Margh-ee?

NISHTA (with fire) Did I ever lie to you in my life, Baby Sister? Ever? *Ever*?

NELL (pondering it) No ... *No!* ... But if you know there's no death or disease in God's love ... why did you take all those medicines to India on your doctor's orders? And don't you still have your arthritis? And take medicines for it?

(Nishta sinks to her chair, paling. Imploring)

Please tell me *why*, Margh-ee! I *do* believe you! But ...

(Nell withdraws into the shadows, her voice growing fainter as she recedes to disappear in the darkness.)

... I have to know ... *Why* ... *Why* ... *Why* ... *W h y* ...

NISHTA (to herself, as to the fading image of Nell; faintly) Because I am still ... Margaret Wilson. Unable to realize God.

(grips typewriter fiercely with both fists as if to shake it, with herself, awake; calling after the fading image)

My only reason for being ... is the Divine. Do you hear me? *Without it there is no meaning to my existence.*

(Springs up and strides to icebox. Going through its contents like a storm-wind, pulls out every medicine bottle she can find and piles them all on kitchen table. As she searches for waste receptacle in which to dump them, there is a pounding on her door. Sound of fog warning and ship's horn boom simultaneously, ominously, with the flinging open of the door. And Jagannath steps in like a dark, vengeful thunder-god.)

JAGANNATH (glaring around room blind with wrath and grief) Where is my son? And the British spy?...

NISHTA They're not here ...

JAGANNATH (before she can finish)

JAGANNATH (turns upon Nishta like a wounded beast, stammering with rage) You. You. It is you. Who use Ashram house. Meant for sadhaks. To recruit. For British Air Force. White Vitch. I pray you return to your own country. Today. *Miss Veelson*. And there ... when you have a son of your own ... *Miss Veelson* ... send him to fight for the British empire. Not my son.

NISHTA How dare you! ... a coloured man ... speak to me like that!

JAGANNATH Get out of India, *Miss Veelson*.

NISHTA (in an equal rage, continues to thump floor) Your English ... has a German accent. ... *Ambu*, get up here at once!

JAGANNATH My accent comes ... of years of study. At fount. Of Aryan culture.

NISHTA Munich? ... *AMBU*?

JAGANNATH Ja, Munich. From which Power comes. To crush enemies. In your deadly pride.

NISHTA Aryan culture: the Aryan swastika ... in reverse! Anti-Christ-ened ... in your brown Nazi beer, fouling signs of Arya ... and the Vedic Light!

JAGANNATH (clasping his Brahmin thread for dear life) You dare teach a Brahmin of *Veda*, American tool of the British? Whose savage fore-fathers, naked, worshipped stones? While Vedic Rishis stood among the constellations, equals of the stars? Take care, *Miss Veelson*! ... when you are cast out of my poor bleeding Mother India's arms ... that your nation remain in isolation, neutral. Or America will go down with Paris and England before the Führer ... and bow the neck. To be ruled by our Aryan ... *Master Race*.

(rushes out)

(*Ambu* has entered unobserved, observing in silence)

NISHTA (finally noticing him, turns her rage upon *Ambu*) Why did it take you so long to get up here, *Ambu*? When I call you're supposed to come at once.

AMBU (calmly, with irony) I am not your coloured slave, my lady. But a servant of ...

NISHTA (interrupts stormily)

Don't interrupt me, Boy! Not only a lazy laggard dragging your heels, but standing aside and ... and enjoying the attack on me ... in my own house! It could have been fatal!

AMBU (continuing calmly) ... A servant of God. His Boy. Not yours.

NISHTA (shaken as much by his calm as by his truthfulness) But it is your present duty ... is it not? ... to serve Him through your Ashram work? Your *karma-yoga*? Which happens to be attending my needs?

AMBU (abruptly) It is not for me to question my small assignment, *Nishta*, but to learn from it. As you must learn from your great assignment ... secretary's work for our Master, who is of my colour not yours ... to give up your pride.

(starting out, suddenly remembers)

I answered late because ... your party of Americans arrives. From American Consulate in Madras. Consul General. And American Navy officer. From ship in harbor. Waiting to see *Miss Margaret Woodrow Wilson*. In Ashram Reception Parlor. To take her to Governor's Palace. For lunch. 12 noon sharp. And it's after 12 noon sharp now. What shall I tell them?

NISHTA Tell them that I must go to *Pritwisingh's* office first ... (hurriedly) I'll tell them myself.

(seizes her handbag and straw hat; pausing, turns back; reddening) *Ambu* ... I'm ... sorry for bursting out at you, *Ambu*. The ego of that man *Jagannath* pretending he's one of the *Master Race*!

AMBU While you don't pretend? (soberly) He is losing all that he loves in the world, *Nishta*. While you ... are losing only your pride.

(she looks away) For a Brahmin to lose only son is tragedy; for there will be no one to say funeral rites for his body when he leaves it ... Is after noon sharp now.

(*Nishta* stiffly, but reflectively, starts out) You are going to Reception Parlor first, *Nishta*? or *Pritwisingh's* office?

NISHTA (sharply) To the office first, remember? "Secretary's work for our Master" ...

AMBU You are ready for *The Life Divine*, *Nishta*?

(She is taken aback.) Better first to Reception duty, is it not?

(He goes out; *Nishta*, about to follow and lock her door, is arrested by Clamour of voices rising from the street)

VOICES OF BEGGARS AND NEWSPAPERMEN

(whining, demanding, arguing in Tamil, French and English)
Pai-see ... pai-see ... pai-see ...

We want to see the President's daughter—*Miss Wilson*—

Miss Margaret Woodrow Wilson lives here—

Representing the *Hindu!*

Daily Mail here!

Amrita Bazar Patrika!

The Indian Express!

This is Ashram property, no one admitted—

Make way, please, for the Americans—

(*Nishta* shrinks back dismayed. She is retreating into the flat as *Pavitra* enters from street swiftly and follows her in.)

PAVITRA (closing door behind them; quietly, calmly, but precisely—and with a smile of sympathy) *Nishta*: the American Consulate limousine *est arrivée* ... with your visitors. They come with your papers ... to help you pack ... and board the ship in Port. To take you back to America.

NISHTA (a gasp) Mother knows? ...

PAVITRA She and Sri Aurobindo know, and are with you. As always. In your ordeal and in your decision, whatever it may be. Mother sends you this Blessings Packet; and will see you after Meditation and your Lantern show in the Hall tonight ... if you are still here.

NISHTA (clutching the Blessings packet like a drowning person) What of *The Life Divine* manuscript? Has it been given?...

(Her words and his answer are lost in the Huh-Bub below. Seen entering from Street, leading her fellow Americans to staircase, are Madge; the Ship's Doctor, a handsome Naval Officer who is supporting the Reverend George, an elderly, imposing Southerner of rigid bearing and courtly manners greatly resembling Woodrow Wilson, his impeccably formal appearance frayed now by heat, exhaustion and nervous anxiety; and the Madras Consulate Secretary, a strong, severe, middle-aged, crisply efficient American woman risen in the State Department's Foreign Service through sheer ability, and wishing as she mops her perspiration that she were anywhere in the world but India. Beckoning to them Madge hurries up staircase to knock urgently on door. Within the flat Pavitrah has withdrawn to an inconspicuous corner where he stands observing the scene with a benign serenity that gives Nishta strength to open the door to her past as ...)

**Light fades to darkness ominously from the sea
Fog Warning and Ship's Horn Boom
ominously from the sea**

End of Act One

ACT TWO

Scene 1: Nishta's quarters. That morning.

LIGHT RISES: cold, clinical, official, as of a mercilessly "objective" illumination of a trial in progress, the Spartan-bare flat enhancing the illusion of a courtroom. A curious stillness envelopes the room in which the Americans sit stiffly as though on fakir's spikes, sipping the Power Syrup Nishta is silently, coolly passing around to her guests—like the White House hostess she was, rather than the subject presently on trial. The Ship's Doctor studying Nishta's medicine bottles is more covertly studying her. Consulate Secretary, arranging the documents from the State Department, Consulate and Pondicherry Police Foreigners' Office "Margaret Woodrow Wilson File" on Nishta's worktable, pushes aside the vase with Amazon Lily, impatiently, then scrutinizes the hostess less covertly—in fact, severely—as the accused. Madge, carefully watching Nishta's cool, carefully controlled reactions, tries to catch her eye signalling her to be wary of the Secretary: that the land is mined. Reverend George, who has been regarding the impassive witness Pavitra at a corner table with several small photographs on it of Sri Ramakrishna and the black Mother Kali in the Dakshinewar Temple, Calcutta, increasingly dismayed, rises portentously, to open proceedings.

SECRETARY Miss Wilson: the Very Reverend Mr. George has travelled all the way from Calcutta to join us on this rescue mission.

REVEREND GEORGE (clears throat; delivers his sermon in solemn Southern accent) My dear Miss Wilson: how joyful I am to be one of the elect trusted to save the daughter of my beloved friend and colleague Woody Wilson from the vengeance of the heathen gods ... (a dark glance at photo of Kali) ...

Who seem to be followin' me here from Calcutta on the dragon tail of Japanese bombin' squadrons. Your late beloved father, of the most eminent Virginia stock of our great Presidents, was son of the most eminent Presbyterian minister in the South, himself a descendant of Presbyterian ministers! As was your saintly mother. (to others proudly)

Our late former beloved First Lady of the Land, Ellen Axson Wilson of Georgia, brought up all three Wilson girls on the Bible! The *Christian* Bible, of course ... They knew their catechism as well as I do, praise the

Lord! Am I right, Miss Wilson? Of course, I'm right! ... Oh, I am feelin' much stronger now that I know we are sailin' home to a Christian country with their cherished first-born ... redeemed from the vengeful Hindoo idols on her trail ... (darker glance at Kali)

Like that terrible black goddess Kali they worship here as God! With her wreath of human skulls! Hideous! O Margaret Wilson ...

SECRETARY (clears throat loudly, rustling files of documents) Thank you, Reverend George. But as time's running out ...

REVEREND GEORGE (raising his eyes heavenward) We thank *Thee*, Lord Jesus! We're homeward bound! (aside to Madge) Miss Madge, may I have a sip of that French wine our American Consul was so kind as to send with us from Madras?

SECRETARY (tapping for order) Our Consul, Miss Wilson, is still attending to your final exit papers with the head of this French Territory at French Police Headquarters' Foreigners Office. He regrets that he could not come to greet you personally at present, but promises to see you off at the pier this evening. I assume you have been notified by the Ashram officials that your discharge from the Ashram has been arranged satisfactorily, so that you and our other American evacuees may leave without delay.

(Reverend George, the floor having been taken away from him, sits suddenly. Madge, focussed nervously on Nishta and Consulate Secretary, spills the wine she is pouring for him.)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (softly) Perhaps Miss Wilson has not been informed that our Ship's Captain has had an emergency call and is back on board ...

(to Nishta carefully) We are on alert for an impending air strike, Miss Wilson. Japanese bombers have been sighted flying south from Calcutta. America is not in the war, so we are trusting in our ship's clear identification ... and preparing to sail as soon as possible from Pondicherry Port.

SECRETARY (crisply) Which means: as soon as we can get your belongings packed, Miss Wilson. (looking about critically) They seem to be at a minimum, fortunately ...

SHIP'S DOCTOR (who has been observing Nishta with sympathy) You may not be aware that our President has cabled special instructions to make certain that you, Miss Wilson, are first among the Americans evacuated from the Coromandel Coast.

REVEREND GEORGE Praise the Lord and His servant in the White House! (savors and drinks the French wine with gusto)

NISHTA (to Ship's Doctor) I have received his cable, sir. But I have no intention of being among the evacuees shipped home. (a stunned silence)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (after the tense pause) You may not be aware, in a sequestered Ashram, that Calcutta has already been bombed by the Imperial Air Force ...

NISHTA I am very aware of the numerous refugees fleeing to the Ashram for shelter.

SHIP'S DOCTOR Shelter? We have been alerted to further air attacks all the way South to Pondicherry itself. The Japanese are preparing to invade India from the East ...

SECRETARY (breaking in briskly) The entire city of Pondicherry ... and the Ashram houses, including this one ... are being sandbagged for defense against the air attacks. Surely you don't wish to hold up your fellow Americans on shore, Miss Wilson, with the ship waiting for you in the harbor!

SHIP'S DOCTOR (gently) In view of our present Non-Intervention policy ... our President wishes to avoid an international incident at all costs. I am told he has personally ... ah ... intervened ... ah ... for your protection, Miss Wilson.

REVEREND GEORGE Praise the Lord and His Hand over His White House children! (drinks)

NISHTA (to Ship's Doctor, smiling) I am grateful for our President's concern. But you may convey to him on your return that I am under other protection than a human government's.

SHIP'S DOCTOR Ah?

NISHTA Shall we say, a higher protection?

SHIP'S DOCTOR The Ashram's?

NISHTA No. The Divine's.

REVEREND GEORGE (a bit doubtfully)
Praise the Lord ... (drinks)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (regarding Nishta with a new respect and admiration) You are not afraid, Miss Wilson? ... If not of bombing raids and invasion, then of consequent upheaval here? Psychologically as well as physically difficult for one of your acute sensitivity to bear ...

NISHTA (smiling) I trust the Protection extends to whatever planes of my being the Divine wills.

"Has the night descended? ...

Not for us the cushion and the slipper ...

I with my soul and body, a curious trip on our way,

Amid the shadows press on ..."

SHIP'S DOCTOR (startled and delighted)

O Pioneers!

(whips out of his Navy jacket a worn paperback edition of Walt Whitman's Poems; continuing to quote as he quickly thumbs through the poem, *Pioneers, O Pioneers!*)

"O you daughters of the West!

O you young and elder daughters! ... in our ranks you move

United, Pioneers! O Pioneers!

We the route for travel clearing ... "

NISHTA and SHIP'S DOCTOR (together, fairly singing it)

"Swift! to the head of the army!

Swift! spring to your places,

Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

(They face, eyes shining; Secretary, beside herself with impatience, raps for attention.)

SECRETARY The Consul and I *must* return to Madras before dark!

(to Madge) If you could *please* start the packing, Miss ...

(But Madge has joined Reverend George praising the Lord in French wine.)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (trying to shake himself of the spell) But I ... would be remiss in my duty as a physician, Miss Wilson, not to warn you ... if I may ... (completing replacement of her medicine bottles in icebox with scrupulous care)

I understand that you must be given regular injections of a serum made of your blood ... which has to be kept refrigerated. Am I correct? In the event of air raids, without electricity ...

NISHTA (looks away; softly) That too I would take as His Will, Doctor. To that alone, I surrender.

SHIP'S DOCTOR (as softly) What if it be His Will ... for the Elder Daughter to return to the West?

(Now she looks at him startled. Ship's Doctor smiles warmly at Nishta as to a newfound, secret comrade.)

REVEREND GEORGE (uncertainly) Praise the Elder Daughter, Lord ... as we return to the West ...

SECRETARY (rises, interrupting sharply) I am sorry to interrupt the poetry session, but we really have very little time. I must cable the results of our efforts to evacuate our American citizens to the State Department in Washington. And speaking of Washington: the Consulate in Madras received this urgent cable ... (extracts cable from file as her trump card)

... From your father's widow in Washington, Mrs. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson ... Mrs. Woodrow Wilson *herself* ... meant to be hand-delivered to you, Miss Wilson. (hands it to Nishta with triumphant air of duty accomplished)

NISHTA (takes it slowly) It has been opened.

SECRETARY (pointing to name on cable pointedly)
It was sent in my care, Miss Wilson. Mrs. Woodrow Wilson was

old at the time of her writing that you had ... disappeared.
(Nishta, adjusting her pince-nez, reads cable rapidly and with close attention. Righteously)
She was frantic about you. About your safety.

NISHTA (looks Secretary square in the eye)
Not about my safety.

SECRETARY (looks away; shuffling through files) I am sure that Mrs. Woodrow Wilson—knowing her as I do—felt your using the name Margaret *Woodrow* Wilson in time of war, thus associating your presence in an Indian Ashram with your eminent father's name, might attract unwanted publicity and attention to your person ... in these dangerous times. After all, Woodrow Wilson *was* our President during the First World War. And in this far more deadly one, our country is happily neutral.

(All are silent, focussed intently on Nishta. Fog Warning and Ship's Horn Boom reverberate from sea. Secretary closes file smartly with a parting shot.)

There has already been far too much publicity in the Indian newspapers about Margaret Woodrow Wilson.

(Nishta places cable in her handbag, gathers together lantern slides, and starts to door in silence.)

MADGE Marga! Where are you going?!

NISHTA To the Meditation Hall. To prepare for tonight's Lantern Show on "*America and the Ideal of Human Unity*." (opens door)

SECRETARY (aghast, hurries after her)
Do I understand you are refusing our President's orders to bring you home, Miss Wilson?!

(detaining her forbiddingly, closes door sharply) And what of your answer to Mrs. Woodrow Wilson? I am sure you intend to reassure her. But as the request was sent in my care ... how do you wish me to answer Edith?!

NISHTA (a direct look, succinctly) I shall indeed answer her ... myself. You may tell her that Margaret *Woodrow* Wilson was my legal name. And that it is no longer mine ... not because of political reasons or fear of attracting unwanted attention and publicity embarrassing to Mrs. Wilson or dangerous to myself ... but because the Sanskrit name *Nishta* has been given to me in its place by my spiritual Teacher, Sri Aurobindo.

(Reopens door. Reverend George rises, a towering figure of indignant, holy wrath.)

REVEREND GEORGE (thundering) *How dare you deny your father ... and your forefathers ... Margaret Woodrow Wilson!!!*

(Collapses. All rush to his side. Amid the general consternation, Nishta disappears. Madge slips out after her.)

Lights Fade Out

ACT TWO

Scene 2: Meditation Hall. Later that day.

LIGHT RISES immediately in *Meditation Hall*, flickering on as for a home lantern show. NISHTA walks rapidly, then runs breathlessly through labyrinthine maze of memories, slides projected on white panels of Hall. At various places of maze, figures call to her accusingly as from witness stands. Among them: a grief-stricken old man, his bowed head completely covered by mantle, sways in mourning; Woman Refugee nursing infant with dry, empty breasts, begs; President Wilson after his paralytic stroke; Edith (Mrs. Wilson 2nd) nursing him, head buried in documents and newspapers; Sister Nell continuously taking pills and pouring and drinking wine; Doctor (in white gown) measuring and re-measuring medicine bottles.

SLIDE 1: *Montage: Princeton University Chapel and Home Interior: Family Photo of Woodrow Wilson and his first wife Ellen Axson with their three daughters as children, dressed for Sunday School.*

VOICES You have *renounced* your *name* and your *religion* Margaret Woodrow Wilson! We want to *see* Margaret Woodrow Wilson who has *renounced* her *name*. And her *religion*. *Pai-see Pai-see ...* And her *country ...*
(ominous Boom of Ship's Horn)

SLIDE 2: *Facade of Woodrow Wilson's Birthplace in Staunton, Virginia.*

REVEREND GEORGE'S VOICE (through Fog Horn)
Grand-daughter of the most eminent Presbyterian minister in the South! *Unredeemed* you shall *fall* into the *terrors* of *hellfire* and *everlastin' death* Margaret Woodrow Wilson
Guilty Guilty of denying her *father* and her *fore-fathers*
Terrible *black* goddess Kali she worships as *God!*
... the Destroyer
Human *skulls* around her neck *Hideous* Guilty Guilty

Slide 3: *White House, President Wilson's Bedroom.* Edith (Mrs. Wilson 2nd) is carrying the stricken President Wilson, assisted by White House Servant Issac—a gentle coloured man of Virginia stock — through room towards bed.

EDITH WILSON (sternly) It's *not* your *tears* that your father asks of you, Margaret, but your *cooperation* in *not* associating *his* name with *your* association with a Hindoo *swami* and Hindoo *idolatry ...* More *carefully* Isaac? Why did it take you so long to get up here? ... You must give up your *pride*, Margaret Wilson and stop edifying his political *enemies ...* Don't you see his beseeching eyes on you? Our world saviour *martyred* by Capitol Hill ...
(Boom of Ship's Horn and Cries of Newspapermen.)

Slide 4: *Capitol in Washington, D.C.*

REVEREND GEORGE'S VOICE (from prone figure of President Wilson as from the dead, piteously) Lord Jesus *we thank* Thee ... We're homeward *bound!*

EDITH WILSON (walking from before *White House* Slide to stand before *Capitol* Slide, an accusing witness)

... His eldest daughter who walked with *Kings* at his side and rode under the Arc de *Triomphe* with us as the world shouted, "VIVE! WILSON!" renouncing his *name*? And *religion*?

CHORUS OF AMERICAN VOICES (chiming in accusingly) *The New York Sunday Times* and *Time Magazine* have discovered you, Margaret Woodrow Wilson! At the feet of the Mother of the Universe, a disciple of an Indian *Revolutionary* ... most feared enemy of the British Empire! Renouncing her name and religion! Guilty! Guilty!

OLD MAN (rises; head and face covered with mantle, points accusing finger) Return to your *own* country, *Miss Veelson* ... and there when you have a son of your *own*, *Miss Veelson* ... send *him* to fight for your deadly *pride* ... not *my* son!

CHORUS *Guilty! Guilty! Guilty*
(Nishta falls to her knees. Madge, at last catching up with her, takes her in her arms like a lost child; tenderly.)

MADGE O Marga. Darling. Come back where you belong! With us ... to your own country, with your own people!
(Nishta breaks from the embrace looking about wildly as if still caught in the Maze images.) What are you doing here? What is it you want, Marga?

NISHTA (rising, flings up her arms as though reaching for the sky) Dear God! Strip me of ego, strip me of pride, that I may reach Thee naked in Thy love! (becoming aware of Madge's presence and tenderness, starts back; calling as to someone behind her) Mother! Don't let them take me back to the old life! Help me ... Help me! ... find His ... Life Divine! ...
(With a swiftness Madge is not prepared for, she runs out.)

Lantern Show Maze Images Fade Out
Lights Rise in Nishta's Flat

(Reverend George, partially restored, is being helped to his feet by Ship's Doctor and Pavitra, as Madge returns. She stands in the doorway wordlessly. Sound of Temple Bells and Chanting heard from a distance casts a spell of peace about the room.)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (after a pause, softly) Did you find her?

MADGE (struggling against tears; with difficulty)
She was a bit ... incoherent. Asking her Mother ... to help her find ... a life divine ...

SECRETARY (snaps her attache case shut with finality) Mrs. Wilson warned me Miss Wilson has a will of steel. And South India's tropical heat has been known to drive Westerners into ... incoherence, if not something worse.

(looking at watch) Horrors! I must get our car back for our Consul! And then, it is at the service of our American citizens: to drive you all to the Pier. But I am afraid we must leave at once, Doctor. The Reverend George can come with you? ... Miss Madge? ...

MADGE I'll take a rickshaw ... to the Meditation Hall first. And then ... join you at the pier.

REVEREND GEORGE Meditation Hall?
(tremulously) Is that what they call their temple ... or wherever they worship ... here?

SHIP'S DOCTOR (to Madge) Let me accompany you if I may. The Reverend will be safe in the car.

REVEREND GEORGE (alarmed) We're not leavin' the Lost Lamb to wander alone in her madness, are we? The Prodigal Daughter of our 28th President?!

PAVITRA (who has concentrated within, looking rather like a motionless owl, comes forward calmly) If Nishta is mad, her madness is for God. And you will not find her in the Meditation Hall. She is on the beach ... at the sea ... this moment.

REVEREND GEORGE (relieved) Waiting at the Pier for us! Praise God! The Prodigal Daughter *will* come home ...

SECRETARY Shall we go? *Now*, please? (marches to door)

REVEREND GEORGE (obediently trotting after her) We must respect our President's orders, must we not, Miss Madge? Doctor, as a Naval Officer? O Praise' be the Lord Jesus our Saviour in times of war and the uprootin' of nations! (out with Secretary)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (to Pavitra) How do you know Miss Wilson ... *Nishua*? is on the beach? At the sea?

MADGE In danger?

PAVITRA Perhaps. But as she told us ... under a protection higher than ours. At this moment we can help her best ... from within. (seats himself erectly in meditation posture, closing his eyes)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (persisting intensely)
How do you know she's at the sea?

(Pavita is silent.) Can you see within ... where she is?
(Madge nudges Doctor to be silent and carefully imitates Pavitra's posture. But Doctor's intensity is increasing.) You told me you were an officer in the First World War. In France. Now that Paris has fallen, how do you see *this* war? You know that the Führer is gathering all Axis forces ... the whole might of the Luftwaffe ... to invade England? And announce the conquest of Europe, and the end of the war, from Buckingham Palace?

PAVITRA (murmurs without moving or opening his eyes)
On Fifteenth August.

SHIP'S DOCTOR So you know! Do you know why that date?

PAVITRA The Invisible Powers ... invisible to us ... using Hitler ... announce their challenge on Sri Aurobindo's birthday ... and their intention: to destroy the work for which Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have come. (opening his eyes, looks directly at Ship's Doctor)

*"For terrible agencies the Spirit allows
And there are subtle and enormous Powers ...
Haters of light ... who serve by enmity the cosmic scheme."*

SHIP'S DOCTOR What work? What cosmic scheme?

PAVITRA The bringing of a new light to earth. That the next race ... may be born.

SHIP'S DOCTOR How do you know *that*?!

PAVITRA Our Teacher writes of it. In his book, *The Life Divine*. Which Nishta is seeking ...

SHIP'S DOCTOR At the sea? (as if to her, as to himself; intensely)
"Passage to India. Passage to more than India! O my soul!
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go ..."
(suddenly turns upon Pavitra challengingly) And how do your Mother and Sri Aurobindo expect us to fight the Invisible Powers, the haters of light? With what weapons?

(crouching beside Pavitra) The German scientists have invented a secret bomb ... according to our Intelligence ... that can unleash the power of the atom. The force that moves the stars! What is their answer to *that* Invisible Power?

PAVITRA (stares ahead as into another dimension) The new light ... the Truth-Consciousness ... is all-powerful. The Spirit's Supermind is unconquerable, Doctor.

SHIP'S DOCTOR (voiceless) The Supermind? ...

PAVITRA I was a scientist before I came to Pondicherry, and in my mathematical research ... stumbled upon the secret of that atomic power: its nucleus. I was so terrified at the prospect of this secret falling into the hands of the anti-Divine beings bent on destroying the human race, that I fled ... to India. And took passage, as your poet says, to more than India ...

SHIP'S DOCTOR (scarcely breathing) The secret of the Supermind ... is in "THE LIFE DIVINE"?

PAVITRA It is. (suddenly rises)
We must go to her now. She is running ... into the sea ...
(goes rapidly out. Ship's Doctor and Madge look at one another)

SHIP'S DOCTOR (at Madge's gasp of fear, takes her arm firmly)
"O my brave Soul—O farther sail!
Are they not all the seas of God?"

(Together they follow Pavitra out at a run. Wail of Alarm Sirens: Sounds Of Air Raid Alert)

ACT TWO

Scene 3

Meditation Hall. THE PRESENT. Later that evening. Lights are still out, all over Pondicherry. But the fog has lifted, and a bright tropical moonlight illumines the white panels of the Hall. It is deserted except for huddled figure of the Old Man, bowed head covered with his mantle, in motionless grief. Pavitra enters supporting Nishta. Hair undone, drenched in sea water, pince-nez gone, she appears in the moonlight to be another being, sea-born—obviously in a state of ecstasy. They are followed by Eliot wearing a European suit soaked with sea water and Anil stripped to the waist, his dhoti as soaked,

carrying all his worldly possessions in a knapsack. Anil stops short before the Old Man, recognizing him.

ANIL (steps back with a muffled exclamation) *Father.*

(Old Man tremblingly raises his head: it is Jagannath who appears as strangely other-worldly in the moonlight as Nishta. Kneeling before his father, Anil makes his last farewell wordlessly.)

PAVITRA (to Eliot softly) I will take Nishta to Mother.

(As he leads Nishta towards the Mother's room, she suddenly turns back to Jagannath and, bowing before his brief, takes his hand and kisses it. Then she returns to Pavitra who escorts her out in the spellbound silence. When they are out, Anil flings his arms around his Father; they cling together, sobbing softly. Eliot withdraws into the shadows of the Hall, respecting their last moments together. Madge and Ship's Doctor hurry in from the street. First to spot ELIOT, she runs to him with a cry of despair.)

MADGE *Eliot.* Margaret has disappeared! In the sea! During the air raid!

ELIOT (buoyantly, like the young Tommy of the past)
Which didn't happen, Madge! Just as Margaret hasn't disappeared in the sea! ... Or rather, if *Margaret* did, *Nishta* didn't! She's safe, Madge!

MADGE *Where?!*

ELIOT Seeing the Mother now. Anil and I ... that is, Anil, who is going with me to England ... as the Mother has given him permission to go ...

(Anil rises, gripping his knapsack with decision and glistening in the moonlight like a young god of victory, to stand beside Eliot.) ... Anil and I saw Nishta far out from shore, where the Mother told us to look for her ...

MADGE You found *Margaret* ... ?! ...

ELIOT ... And fished her out of the sea smooth as glass. Actually, she was in a state of bliss ... floating in it. She was always a good swimmer, remember? But this was something different. We were barely able to get her to shore, even though she was light as a feather.

SHIP'S DOCTOR (as buoyantly grinning)
"Are they not all the seas of God," Madge? "Daring joy, but safe!"

MADGE And what's happened to your Hindu robe, Tommy? (Pavitra has returned, shining.)

ELIOT (hesitates, and turns to Pavitra as one who might explain the inexplicable) When I saw the Mother this morning, somehow ... old Swami Udaranda ... disappeared. In eyes which were quite as blue and unfathomable as that ocean of bliss. And when Anil and I left her presence, I was holding ... this suit. And a rose. The rose of peace, I was told. And the unspoken answer to where I was going to find ... it ...

SHIP'S DOCTOR Peace?
(Eliot nods, voiceless with unexpected tears.)

MADGE (longingly) And where ... are you going to find it, Eliot?
(he looks at her luminously ... still unable to answer) Tommy!
You look so young somehow!

SHIP'S DOCTOR (looks about in wonder) This is a magical place ... of strange disappearances ... and sea-changes ...

ELIOT (takes Anil's hand in his) Can we leave with you tonight, Doctor? And be dropped off at the nearest port and ship sailing for England? Anil hopes to become a pilot in the RAF; he has Mother's blessing. And I ... a fire-fighter in London.

MADGE Where it is *raining* fire, Tommy?! To find *peace*?!
(He can only nod in wonder; she looks to Pavitra.)

PAVITRA (smiling) "Fear not, doubt not, grieve not—for in our apparent body is One—the One—whom no power can slay."

SHIP'S DOCTOR Time to ship off, Mates! On His seas!
And Hers! ...

(They start out. Nishta enters and stands in the passage from the Mother's room. They turn back to see a radiant apparition in a white sari, glowing, young. In her arms she cradles, like a new mother, her first-born, the Manuscript—wrapped in hand-marbled silk. Exchanging silent farewells, they are unable to speak. Nishta can only radiate her love and new-found happiness, the joy that makes her one with them ... with all. Madge hurries out then, quickly to forestall the tears, clinging to Ship's Doctor arm. The All-Clear Signal sounds. Even when Eliot lingers behind to say goodbye in silence to Nishta, Anil at his side, they can only look at one another as already far distant in space and time, yet ever-present, but always—in love.

NISHTA (when they are gone, looks about wonderingly; to Pavitra) Where was I ... tonight?...

(She looks down at the silk-wrapped Manuscript in her arms as a miracle still not quite comprehensible.)

PAVITRA (smiles; softly) Perhaps being born? In the sea?
(She touches the bundle, smoothing its silken wrapping to reassure herself of its reality.)

And into a new life, Nishta? (She nods; and suddenly sits on the Meditation Hall floor. Understanding her need to be alone with the miracle, Pavitra goes quietly out. And Nishta is left bending over the future in her arms as ...)

The Lights Fade Out

The End and The Beginning

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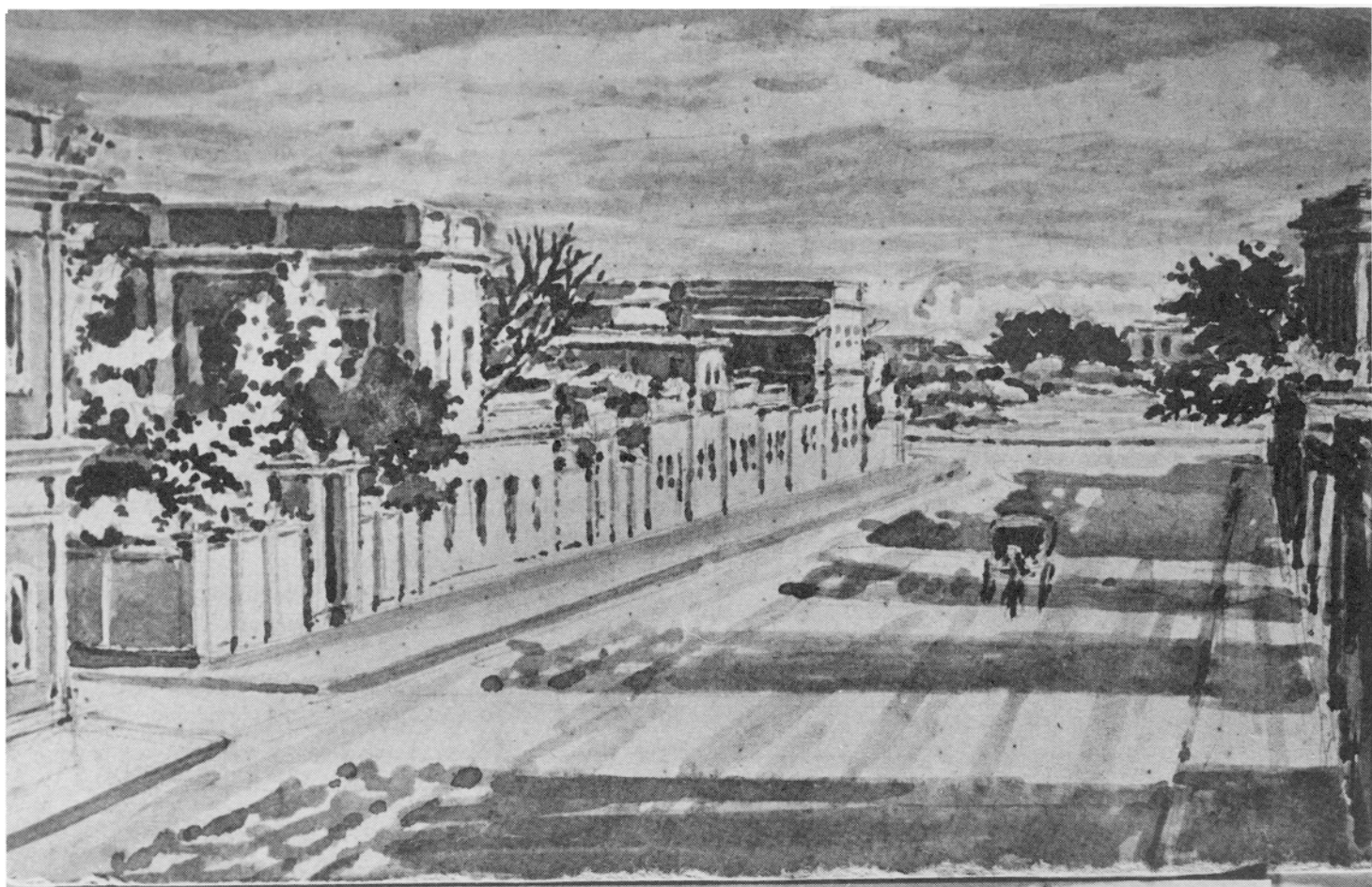
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Nishta's house in Pondicherry (corner house on left side)

Painting by Jayantilal

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